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Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS

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* *Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of November 4, 1940.*
† *"Suzanna and the Elders" opened last Tuesday, October 29th, at the Morosco Theatre.*
† *"Panama Hattie" opened last Wednesday, October 30th, at the 46th St. Theatre.*
† *"Return Engagement" opened Friday, November 1st, at the Golden Theatre.*

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

New York Sun	New York Times
New York Post	New York Daily News
New York Herald Tribune	New York World-Telegram

Place this week's reviews with preceding weekly reviews so as to have always an up to date file of the New York Stage.

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"Return Engagement"

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *November 2, 1940*

'Return Engagement' Is One About Some Barn Theatre Didoes

"Return Engagement," comedy by Lawrence Riley. Produced by W. Horace Schmidlapp and Joseph M. Gaites at the John Golden Theatre, New York, Nov. 1, 1940.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

LAWRENCE RILEY, whose first comedy, "Personal Appearance," was so successful when Brock Pemberton produced it with Gladys George that he has been resting on his royalties the last couple of years, comes forward now with a little something called "Return Engagement."

It is a comedy that many young playwrights feel an urge to write when they first come into the theatre. The theatre itself is amusing to them, and the actors fascinating types. They feel something should be done with them.

So frequently they rewrite the story of the ambitious ingenue, the retired actress with a great craving to recapture an old thrill, the happy young author with his first script accepted and, most hackneyed situation of all, the off-stage rehearsal with interruptions that are never quite as comic as they promise to be in the writing.

Mr. Riley has done a fair job toying with this old material. His characters are a little less trite than many that have been used before.

And his plot, which has to do with the reunion of Elizabeth Emerson and Geoffrey Armstrong, who had been married and were ten years divorced the week they were engaged as guest stars at the Stockton Summer Theatre in Connecticut.

Elizabeth discovers that she still loves the old ham she had divorced because he must play the great lover on and off. Geoffrey flirts with the lady angel who is backing the Stockton group, and finally is exposed as a pompous fraud.

Young Mr. Horace Schmidlapp and the older Mr. Joseph Gaites, who first produced "Return Engagement" in Boston, have given the play a nice setting and an expensive cast. But even they can't do much for it.

Evelyn Varden has a few moments as the stock company's flighty manageress. Audrey Christie gives the Christie snap to the observations of an old trouper. Leona Powers plays the wealthy widow who once was in the chorus, though she likes to think she was with Robert B. Mantell, with good effect.

Mady Christians and Bert Lytell have the leads, and neither is particularly happy in the assignment. Augusta Dabney is pleasantly earnest as the inspired ingenue and Thomas Coley does well as the young playwright.

Last night's first audience at the John Golden theatre was friendly, but probably not greatly encouraged.

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *November 2, 1940*

Return Engagement Opens at Golden

Lawrence Riley's New Play Tells Trials of a Summer Theater; Mady Christians Heads Cast

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

RETURN ENGAGEMENT, a new play by Lawrence Riley, is all about the summer theater, and so faithfully has the author copied the operations and captured the atmosphere of some of the worst of those pastoral enterprises that it is possible for one to get quite as bored with the proceedings as he would be at the actual scene.

It is not altogether a bad play that opened last night at the John Golden Theater. An occasional bright line may be found in it, and certain actors, including Mady Christians, Bert Lytell, Audrey Christie and Evelyn Varden help to make some of these lines sound witty. But the situations are so stereotyped and the denouement is so clearly signaled in advance—long before the first act curtain, in fact—that no second or third act would be necessary. Without those acts, there would of course be no need for the first. And that would be all right with me.

Mr. Riley's theme is the old, old story of the passe actor who returns to the summer theater to play opposite an ex-wife, and you know without my telling you that the ex-wife, who is the better actor, steals the show, wins a new Broadway contract and won't take it unless her ex-husband comes along to play too.

As a subplot, there is a wealthy and kittenish widow who backs the summer theater in order to get her ungainly daughter a part in the show, and who tries to snare the actor. The first plot fails when the daughter is lured away on opening night and the deserving understudy gets the part; the second breaks down when the actor's ex-wife swipes his false teeth and thus prevents him from having dinner with the widow.

In spite of—or perhaps because of—the fact that these situations and many of the lines have done heavy duty for years, a cast that deserves far better material than this performed stoutly and with great courage.

Miss Varden, forsaking the quiet, motherly roles in which she is so splendid, gives a highly humorous interpretation of a summer theater entrepreneur. Miss Christians is believable as the middle-aged actress, and managed to make the most banal of lines somehow clever. Miss Christie is cast in the role of the sophisticated girl who sits on the sidelines and makes wisecracks (there has to be one in every comedy, these days), and I find her brand of comedy as engaging as ever and, in fact, one of the high spots of the evening.

Mr. Lytell turned in a competent performance of the boastful and hammy actor, and the younger boys and girls, with the possible exception of Caryl Smith, who could be a charming young actress if properly directed but who was misled into overrating her rather important role, played agreeably.

Return Engagement is a slight misadventure, but Mr. Riley should try again.

"Return Engagement"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *November 2, 1940*

'Return Engagement,' a Limp Comedy, Is Presented at the Golden

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

A COMEDY called "Return Engagement" and written by Lawrence Riley straggled across the stage of the John Golden Theater last evening, going nowhere in particular and limping quite badly on the way. Much water has passed under the bridge since 1934, when this same Mr. Riley convulsed the town with "Personal Appearance," but the stream of the author's talent seems to have been flowing backward. It is all very disappointing.

Mr. Riley has retained his interest in people of the theater. His scene this time is a summer playhouse, and all his characters are stage struck. Mady Christians, for example, portrays an actress in her middle years but with glamour unabated who is willing to appear in a coach house at Stockton, Conn., for art and five hundred a week. Bert Lytell is the leading man she had loved and married, and been separated from and still loved. Miss Evelyn Varden is the resident director, dressing for opening night in a delightfully improbable dress and, incidentally, playing throughout with fine comic tartness. There are boys and girls to fall in love; a young author to stare, round-eyed, as his imagined characters take on life; a disillusioned actress to wise-crack and Miss Leona Powers to play, excellently enough, a difficult financial backer with an awkward daughter.

It is all, you may guess, familiar enough. The actress and her leading man come together again, wryly repeating their love lines from the play within Mr. Riley's play. The right girl gets to act the part and finds she was mistaken in thinking that the right boy did not love her. The right jokes are made, or almost made, about the characteristic oddities of summer theaters and on one occasion Miss Christians steals Mr. Lytell's false teeth. (Not the real Mr. Lytell's teeth, you understand. These are teeth within teeth.)

The plot has that uneasy complication which plots are apt to have when they have not been thought out very clearly. The jokes range from the limply familiar to the pretty good, with the former in unfortunate predominance. Nothing, I am grieved to report, is quite right about "Return Engagement."

Not even the acting is entirely satisfactory. Miss Varden gives vitality to her role, and astutely points its comedy. Miss Powers and Miss Audrey Christie make the best of theirs and Miss Augusta Dabney is charming and straight forward. But Miss Christians seems unhappy in her part and Mr. Lytell can find little in his. Miss Caryl Smith, very amusing at moments, has been allowed to run wild at others. One is left feeling that Rowland Leigh, who directed, did not get around to finishing his job, and that something interrupted Mr. Riley in the middle of revision. "Return Engagement" plays like a first draft.

'RETURN ENGAGEMENT'

A comedy in three acts by Lawrence Riley; staged by Rowland Leigh; production under the supervision of Frank Merlin; setting by Johannes Larsen; presented at the John Golden Theater on November 1, 1940, by W. Horace Schmidlapp and Joseph M. Gaites. The cast:

Mrs. Autumn Hetherington ..... Evelyn Varden
George ..... William Leicester
Bob ..... Peter Garey
Patsy Tomkins ..... Augusta Dabney
Eddie ..... Alexander Nicol
Eloise Hubbard ..... Ruth Lott
Ruth Conway ..... Audrey Christie
Mrs. Carlotta Faulkner ..... Leona Powers
Geneva Faulkner ..... Caryl Smith
Bill Gardiner ..... Thomas Coley
Elizabeth Emerson ..... Mady Christians
Geoffrey Armstrong ..... Bert Lytell
Baldy Bemis ..... Lewis L. Russell
Albert ..... Warren Clarke
Geneva's Maid ..... Helen Reid

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *November 2, 1940*

"Return Engagement" Seen at the Golden

By JOHN MASON BROWN

ALTHOUGH several dramatists have attempted to write comedies at the summer theatres' expense, the citadels of the cow-house drama have so far resisted playwrights who have laughed at Thespis for being in a barn. To the list of those who have tried and failed must now be added Lawrence Riley, so gratefully remembered for "Personal Appearance."

His "Return Engagement" drowsed for three acts at the Golden last night, endeavoring to extract a comedy from materials by now familiar enough. The remodeled coach house, the flighty rich woman to whom it belongs, the silly daughter for whom this same patroness insists upon having a part, the matron (this time conscientious) with aesthetic pretentions, the hard-working apprentices, and two temperamental visiting stars — all of these are types figuring almost inevitably in Mr. Riley's new script.

His locale demands their presence. If they have been found in most plays on the same subject, it is because they are to be found in most summer theatres. Evidently there is no escaping them. Mr. Riley is at his best, which in this case is not much of a best, when he does not try to do so.

Writing of a stock subject in stock terms, he can occasionally bat out some funny lines. But Mr. Riley has also faced the need of connecting his jokes with a plot. And his plot, which is mainly about a famous actor and actress who were once married and now fall in love again during a summer theatre engagement, is sour enough as he develops it to curdle the sweetest joke.

Mr. Schmidlapp and Mr. Gaites have produced "Return Engagement" exactly as if it were a good play. For it, believe it or not, they have assembled a company including Bert Lytell, Mady Christians, Audrey Christie, Leona Powers, and Evelyn Varden. But the pleasantest feature of a pointless evening is Miss Varden's stage-struck matron. Always an excellent actress, Miss Varden once again demonstrates how genuine is her authority and how adroit is her sense of comedy. Where she unearthed her last act evening dress, which is a triumph in deliberate absurdity, is a mystery. The only pity is that Mr. Riley's comedy does not shine throughout as do the rhinestones on Miss Varden's gown.

In spite of Miss Varden, however, and the other well-known players in the cast; and in spite, too, of such agreeable youngsters as Augusta Dabney, Caryl Smith, and Thomas Coley, my advice to anyone really interested in the inner-workings of a summer theatre is to stay home and read "Bethel Merriday."

"Return Engagement"

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *November 2, 1940*

Lawrence Riley Makes Faces at Summer Theatres in a Comedy Entitled 'Return Engagement'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH the Summer theatres frequently seem gauche in their own season, they are more brilliant than the plays written about them in the Winter. Lawrence Riley is now making grimaces at a Summer theatre in "Return Engagement," which was acted by a good cast at the John Golden last evening. According to Tecumseh's records, which never lie, Mr. Riley wrote "Personal Appearance" five years ago, and made a fortune, although, of course, that should not be mentioned in the world of art. If it were not for the records, this column would imagine that Mr. Riley has never written a play before. Certainly it hopes that he will never write another like "Return Engagement."

* * *

Quips at the expense of the Summer theatre come with ill grace from playwrights who are not in Winter form. Writing in a studiedly facetious vein, Mr. Riley gives all his characters the same kind of lines. They are airily poisonous. As soon as the curtain rises, they start demolishing something that does not exist. For Mr. Riley knocks down his Summer theatre before he has time to construct it, and he cuts the plot out from under his feet before he has time to invent it. Just as an exercise in metaphysics, put that down as the neatest trick of the week.

What Mr. Riley has in mind is this: A middle-aged actress and a middle-aged actor, previously married and divorced, find themselves engaged as stars in a Summer theatre try-out. As a rule-of-thumb drama invariably has it, the parts they are playing are curiously like the lives they have had together. Since it is bad form for a drama critic to reveal the dénouement of a plot, this column would never think of suggesting that the actress and the actor are reunited in the last scene. You will have to use your own judgment about that.

* * *

Otherwise, "Return Engagement" chortles with malicious glee over the infirmities of the Summer theatres—the daisy-chain lessons in acting, the household arrangements for the cast, the primitive theatre facilities, the tantrums of the rich patroness who insists that her feeble-minded daughter play one of the leading parts, the distractions of rehearsal and the pettiness of temperament.

Some good actors find themselves paddling desperately in Mr. Riley's shallows. Bert Lytell, the respected headman of Actors Equity, is there. Mady Christians, the illustrious Queen in the Evans's "Hamlet," is present. Evelyn Varden, who played one of the mothers in "Our Town," is on the job. Audrey Christie and Leona Powers are also engaged in the trade of making bricks without straw; and among the new faces there is that of Augusta Dabney, which is worth watching and also pleasant to see, and that of Thomas Coley, which is all right, too. But no one gives much of a performance, least of all Mr. Riley, who wrote the play out of a mistaken sense of superiority.

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *November 2, 1940*

Old Straw Hat

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

AS ONE who has made a brief and belated examination of the summer theaters, I can tell you that strange and amateurish things sometimes take place in the barn playhouses. You would, however, hardly expect a Broadway contemplation of such matters to be quite as strange or half as amateurish as "Return Engagement," a new play which deals fatuously with the sex life of the straw hat circuit and clumsily studies the veterans and the novices of rural thespianism at work and at play. There is a certain photographic air about the comedy which suggests that the author has observed with some fidelity the activities he has dramatized. The trouble isn't with what he has to say but with the way in which he has said it. In truth, this "Return Engagement" is such a shambling and shiftless comedy that it is difficult to believe that Lawrence Riley, the dramatist, has ever written a play before, to say nothing of the expert "Personal Appearance."

* * *

"Personal Appearance" was no masterpiece but it was sufficiently gay and sufficiently expert to be an amusing and popular entertainment. After it was produced, Mr. Riley went into the silences, which is a rather inadequate way of describing Hollywood, where, I believe, he actually did go. For years he was missing, but from time to time a courier would arrive by pony express with the news that he was busily concocting a play between scenarios. As nearly as one can discover, this is it. It is all about the Stockton Playhouse, a converted coach house where a formidable and foolish lady named Mrs. Autumn Hetherington is running a summer theater. Here a veteran actress and her ex-husband, adequately described as a ham from Hollywood, find themselves appearing in a new play by a starry-eyed young author. The plot is something about how the ingenue of the company is almost deprived of her role in the play by the nice but silly daughter of the amorous widow, who is backing the theater. The widow is also making what could accurately be called passes at the ex-Hollywood star, and, for some reason, the veteran actress wants to get her ex-husband back. But, to use one cliche of dialogue which the author forgot—why am I telling you all this?

* * *

That the summer theater could well be the topic of a good comedy I do not doubt. It might even be said that the general plot idea of "Return Engagement" could conceivably be the framework for that particular comedy. But Mr. Riley has written his version of the tale so clumsily and inexpertly that his work seems hopelessly inept. It is typical of his play that one of the climaxes arrives when the actress steals her ex-husband's false teeth to keep from running away with the rich widow. As usual, the acting is much better than the play. Miss Mady Christians is forthright and sympathetic as the veteran actress, Bert Lytell burlesques the fatuous fellow from Hollywood with gusto, Miss Evelyn Varden isn't too extravagant as the manager of the playhouse, Miss Audrey Christie plays a sardonic soubrette engagingly and Miss Leona Powers no doubt does as much as possible with the role of the amorous widow. Among the younger players of the cast there are attractive performances by Miss Augusta Dabney, who is fresh and pleasant as the ingenue, and by Miss Caryl Smith, who is likable and sympathetic as the silly daughter whose rich mother wants a theatrical career for her. The direction is not of vast help, and the play is a dismal disappointment.

"Panama Hattie"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *October 31, 1940*

'Panama Hattie,' With Ethel Merman, Opens at the Forty-sixth Street

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

IT IS TIME now for the annual pæan in praise of Miss Ethel Merman, who came swinging back to town last evening in "Panama Hattie," a particularly luxurious musical comedy contrived by B. G. De Sylva. Everything is right as right can be with Miss Merman and everything is pretty much right with "Panama Hattie," which has music and lyrics by Cole Porter, costumes and scenery by Raoul Pene DuBois and a book by Herbert Fields and Mr. De Sylva himself.

Put all these people together and you have a show which ought to keep the Forty-sixth Street Theater bright and gay for months to come. Mr. DuBois, aided by the inspiration he apparently keeps in his hip pocket, has made it both by keeping the stage full of gorgeous color. His settings have a super-DuBois glitter and his costumes glow on the pretty girls Mr. De Sylva has generously provided. Mr. Porter's songs give Miss Merman plenty of chances, and a chance is all Miss Merman ever needs.

The book is, to be sure, a little odd. It appears to turn upon a plot to blow up the Panama Canal and that seems rather a weighty theme for such goings-on as these. Miss Merman saves the canal, which is mighty fine of her—she's just the girl to do it, I think, supposing it needs to be done. By saving the canal, Miss Merman also saves love, and if this sounds a little complicated you will have to take the matter up with Mr. Fields and Mr. De Sylva. (Seems Miss Merman, who has a rough exterior as Hattie, got in bad with her man's boss, but after she saved the canal the boss relented. Sounds pretty silly, doesn't it?)

In addition to Miss Merman, who sings such things as "Let's Be Buddies," "My Mother Would Love You," "I've Still Got My Health" and "Make It Another Old-Fashioned, Please," and who walks with her own amazing elasticity and who is very comical when she chooses, "Panama Hattie" has other enticements. It has Rags Ragland, Pat Harrington and Frank Hyers to play funny sailors; James Dunn to be loved by Miss Merman and Miss Betty Hutton. Miss Hutton is so animated she almost comes apart, and I think it would be nice if she could calm down a little—just to the pace of St. Vitus dance, say. Also present are Nadine Gae, who dances beautifully; Carmen D'Antonio, who dances disturbingly; Arthur Treacher, who is gravely comical, and Joan Carroll, who must be all of 8 and is a nice little girl, even if she is a Hollywood child.

Everything is, in short, going great guns at the Forty-sixth Street. Miss Merman particularly.

'PANAMA HATTIE'

A musical comedy in two acts; music and lyrics by Cole Porter; book by Herbert Fields and B. G. De Sylva; costumes and scenery by Raoul Pene DuBois; dances by Robert Alton; book staged by Edgar MacGregor; presented at the Forty-sixth Street Theater on October 30, 1940, by Mr. De Sylva. The cast:

Mrs. Gonzales	Conchita
Mac	Eppy Pearson
Skat Briggs	Pat Harrington
Windy Deegan	Frank Hyers
Woozy Hogan	Rags Ragland
Chiquita	Nadine Gae
Fruit Peddler	Linda Griffith
Tim	Roger Gerry
Tom	Raymond Baine
Ted	Ted Daniels
Ty	Lipman Duckat
Hattie Maloney	Ethel Merman
Leila Tree	Phyllis Brooks
Mildred Hunter	Blaine Shepard
Kitty Gelle Randolph	Ann Graham
Nick Bullett	James Dunn
Florrie	Betty Hutton
Geraldine Bullett	Joan Carroll
Vivian Budd	Arthur Treacher
First Stranger	Al Downing
Second Stranger	Frank DeRoss
Mike	Jack Donahue
Whitney Randolph	James Kelso

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *October 31, 1940*

Miss Merman in Panama

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

HERE is Broadway girl-and-music saturnalia at its peak, humorous, tuneful, hard-boiled, sentimental, rapidly paced and handsome, filled with good low comedians and beautiful girls and starring the wonderful Miss Ethel Merman in the leading role. You really shouldn't ask for much more. Mr. De Sylva, the producer, is likewise the sponsor of "DuBarry Was A Lady" and "Louisiana Purchase," but "Panama Hattie" seems to me by far the best of the trio. I should say that, with the three of them running in town at one time, Mr. De Sylva now stands pretty conclusively as head man in the field of musical comedy production. Put down this "Panama Hattie" as a rough and rowdy show, in the tradition of handsomely dressed burlesque, and give it credit for being so frank and forthright in its bawdry that there isn't a touch of prurience in it. In a word or two, I recommend it.

* * *

Probably it is hardly worth bothering you with the information that "Panama Hattie" has some sort of plot about an attempt to blow up the Canal Zone and the schemes of the wicked Miss Phyllis Brooks to double-cross Miss Merman and take her lover away from her. I may add that both machinations fail, and then go on to tell you that Mr. Porter's score is gay and engaging, that the book by Herbert Fields and Mr. De Sylva doesn't get in the way, that Robert Alton has staged the dances with his usual skill and originality, that the sets and costumes by Raoul Pene DuBois are strikingly beautiful and that the lighting is exceptional. Even then we haven't got around to Miss Merman, and in this connection I may add that she is even better than ever, which is saying something. It is hard to believe it, but I think that she sings more effectively, acts more engagingly and looks handsomer than in any of her previous shows.

* * *

Mr. De Sylva has tried one hazardous thing in "Panama Hattie" and he has managed to get away with it with remarkable deftness. As I have said, this is a hard-boiled show, with lines, situations and songs that are merrily given to the topic of lechery. A vastly amusing low comedian named Rags Ragland, who is in the best tradition of the burlesque comic, is a hilarious fellow, and so are his antic companions, Pat Harrington and Frank Hyers, of Jack White's celebrated Club 18. When these boys get together, the humor is not for sensitive folk. Yet in the same show there is a genuinely charming child of eight named Joan Carroll, who performs so delightfully that any prejudice you may have against child actresses is certain to be destroyed forthwith. By the shrewdest of selection, it has been seen that little Miss Carroll is not on the stage during the rowdiness and that the show gets amiably sentimental when she appears. I can only hope, though, that she doesn't pass much of her time off stage standing in the wings.

* * *

Prominent in the cast is Arthur Treacher, the cinema butler, who now becomes a stage butler and makes the transition with considerable success. There is an excellent dancer in the person of Miss Nadine Gae, and, while Miss Brooks is inclined to go to extremes in her impersonation of the villainess of the show, she is pretty enough to more than atone for it. James Dunn, of the films, is a satisfactory hero. At this moment my kind words must cease, for present in the cast is Miss Betty Hutton, the litterbug, and it is my impression that Miss Hutton should be given one number, if that, in the course of an evening and then be permitted to work off her surplus energies elsewhere. Rather than end on such a surly note, though, I would prefer to go back to Mr. Porter's score for a moment. It is filled with any number of excellent songs and it might be hard for one to pick his favorite from them. I think that of all the numbers, I most enjoyed a comic song called "You Said It," which Miss Merman and the Messrs. Treacher, Harrington and Hyers sing to splendid effect. "Panama Hattie" should prove to be a phenomenal hit.

"Panama Hattie"

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *October 31, 1940*

Panama Hattie Has All a Musical Needs

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

PANAMA HATTIE blew into the 46th Street Theater last night with breezy Ethel Merman in the title role, a portfolio of catchy Cole Porter songs to swing on, glittering scene arrangements by Raoul Pene DuBois and the exciting variety of dancing for which B. G. De Sylva's musical shows have become especially noted in recent years. So who could ask for anything more?

Mr. De Sylva, incidentally, hangs up some sort of record, at least for these lean years along Broadway for he now has three extravagant productions running at one time, two of them smash hits, and the latest, Panama Hattie, promising to become one.

If you remember a song in Du Barry, in which La Merman told the saga of Katie in Haiti, you may like to know that Katie seems to have moved over to Panama, where she has become Hattie. At least it seems like the same girl, in the same short, tight bobble skirt, with the same feather boa and ostrich plumes and gaudry jewelry, and—at the beginning of the new show—with approximately the same set of morals.

Panama Hattie, however, has a heart of gold, the instinct of motherhood and deep, pure love in her heart for a good man. So she reforms, which is too bad, because most of the customers prefer her when she is wicked and more interesting. Anyway, her regeneration is complete when she saves the canal from being blown up by fifth columnists and the curtain falls on a scene of maudlin joy.

* * *

You can see by this that the book, by Herbert Fields and Mr. De Sylva, doesn't really amount to much, but who cares so long as the Merman girl is on the stage with a song to sing and some expert clowning to do?

There is no exquisite Bert Lahr in this year's show, but Mr. De Sylva has surrounded his star with some excellent hired help. There is, for instance, the solemn-visaged and meticulously correct Arthur Treacher, the world's greatest Wodehouse butler, who has come back from Hollywood to add dignified gaiety to the proceedings. There is Rag Ragland, up from burlesque, giving his genial buffoonery to the scene. And James Dunn, a little hoarse on opening night, but spreading his fine personality all over the stage. And Pat Harrington and Frank Hyers, making with Ragland a trio of whole-souled American gobs who have only one thing on their collective mind.

There is also a young woman of 8, who has the most attractive child personality I have ever seen outside of a Shirley Temple picture, and there were moments when this charming youngster nearly ran away with the whole production. Her name is Joan Carroll, and Hollywood must have been blind to let her go.

Mr. De Sylva is particularly fortunate—or particularly wise—in his selection of dancers. Nadine Gae is not featured in the billing, but I think she should be. For two years we have seen her, first in One for the Money and then in Two for the Show, and this column goes on record as declaring her one of the most pleasing young dancers on the Broadway stage today. She is graceful and adept and she does not attempt the impossible. And she is one of the glorious few who do NOT wear the fixed and artificial smile of the professional adagio artist.

* * *

Betty Hutton, Public Jitterbug No. 1, is also screaming her wares in Panama Hattie, and is the same quivering bundle of nerves and muscles that she was last season. She is the brass trumpet of the De Sylva band, and if you like her, as most people do, your evening will be complete.

The most typical Merman songs—hence the most memorable—are I've Still Got My Health, My Family Would Love You, Let's Be Buddies (despite a touch of mawkish sentiment) and I'm Throwing a Ball Tonight. The most entertaining, however, in the tomfoolery of its lyrics and the manner of its delivery was one called You Said It, in which Miss Merman was joined by the Messrs. Treacher, Ragland, Hyers and Harrington.

The music, as a whole, is not the most striking of Mr. Porter's recent work, but it is brisk and fresh and crisp, and it sets a good pace for the show. The dialogue contains, from time to time, some extraordinary funny lines and newly coined quips, which the boisterous and pure-tongued Merman delivers with gusto.

It begins to appear that the only sure hits on Broadway are the revivals and the musicals, and this is one of them.

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *October 31, 1940*

Ethel Merman in 'Panama Hattie' With Cole Porter's Songs and Lyrics and Lots of Stuff

By BROOKS ATKINSON

EVERYTHING is in order in "Panama Hattie," which opened at the Forty-sixth Street last evening. Cole Porter wrote the music and lyrics in his pithiest style, and Ethel Merman sings them like a high-compression engine. Cole plus Merman is a combination that has yielded some memorable musical shows in recent years. 'Panama Hatttie" holds her own with any of them. For Herbert Fields and B. G. De Sylva have written a roaring book about sailors in the Panama Canal Zone. By hiring a trio of knockabout comedians, Mr. De Sylva has given it all the advantages of a burlesque show. There is even a touch of sentiment in it. Although Broadway's expectations of "Panama Hattie" have been ambitious, the realities are equal to the occasion. Everything is noisy, funny and in order.

* * *

Not in proper order exactly. Improper order comes closer to the truth. If you go to the theatre, you know what sailors in Panama are interested in. Well, it ain't in battleships. Hewing close to the facts of life, the authors have thrown the sailors at the strumpets in the water-front honky-tonks, taking pains to present La Merman as a coarse-timbred entertainer with a heart of gold. She knows what to do with a part like that. She rolls through it with the greatest gusto, giving it a shake and a gleam and plenty of syncopation. Most of Gotham's round-abouts will be turning up some time during the Winter to hear her bellowing "Visit Panama," "I've Still Got My Health" and "You Said It," and turning "Make It Another Old-Fashioned, Please" into a torch song. The Merman hangs bangles on any song that comes her way.

* * *

"Panama Hattie" does not seem to be particularly bawdy, although undoubtedly it is. For the sailors are played with a kind of youthful braggadocio by Pat Harrington and Frank Hyers, who usually throw jokes around at Jack White's boisterous hang-out, and by Rags Ragland, who has done a long stretch in burlesque. Being full of animal exuberance, they manage to keep "Panama Hattie" out of the middens. And Betty Hutton as a diva of the Canal joints is in the pink of health, raising ructions with the book in her style of blond vertigo. Arthur Treacher strides solemnly through sin as a dour butler. For sunshine and sentiment, little Joan Carroll, who is now fully eight years old, is wholly captivating. She and Miss Merman get along together beautifully, and gruff old codgers are going to choke a little this Winter when tot and temptress sing "Let's Be Buddies" and bring the house down.

* * *

As a matter of fact, "Panama Hattie" is as stuffed with good things as a minee pie. Dancers are forever whirling through it like swarms of tropical flies, and ballets in some of Raoul Pène DuBois's most flamboyant costumes are forever charging on and off. The South American influence is creeping into Broadway culture. The welcome as well as the dancing is warm. Nadine Gae and Carmen D'Antonia need asbestos stages.

If the Navy ever hears about "Panama Hattie," it will be hard to keep the fleet in the Pacific. As far as that goes, it is going to be hard to keep New Yorkers at home in the evenings this Winter.

"Panama Hattie"

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *October 31, 1940*

"Panama Hattie", Hot Number Fresh From the Canal Zone

"Panama Hattie," musical comedy by Herbert Fields and B. G. De Sylva; music and lyrics by Cole Porter. Produced by Mr. De Sylva at the 46th St. Theatre, New York, Oct. 30, 1940.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

NOW we have the lusty and likable Ethel Merman pretending to be one of the most virginous of the Canal Zone girls with a throat bursting with romantic and comical songs and a heart bursting with motherly love.

They are fast and crafty thinkers, the Herbert Fields-Buddy De Sylva-Cole Porter trio, as you who remember "Du Barry Was a Lady," as who doesn't? well know.

They have evolved a safe formula for musical comedies which contrasts sex with sentiment and burlesque with beauty. It worked with "Du Barry," which began in a gents' wash room and moved on to the Palace at Versailles.

And it works in "Panama Hattie," which begins at the Tropical Shore, where Hattie is one of the girls, and moves on to Philadelphia where she promises to become one of the Bulletts.

At least that appeared to be the plot pattern when I reluctantly left the first performance last night.

It Was This Way

Nick Bullett was one of the trusted men at the control room of the Canal locks. He had employed his off time making love to Hattie, and when his 8-year-old daughter was shipped down from Philadelphia by his divorced wife's mother he was in a bit of a spot.

He wanted to marry Hattie—but what if the child didn't like her? Which she didn't!

Then it was up to Hattie to win over the child, or for Nick to change his plans.

Hattie and Nick have a two-act time of it. But when Hattie rushes down a treadmill road at the end of the evening and saves Nick—and the Canal—and the chief comedian—from being blown up by a Fifth Column bomb—what can you expect?

Expect what you want to. What you get is a musical comedy entertainment that, like "DuBarry," makes up in showier entertainment values what it lacks in refinement.

And who would expect refinement, as such, from Herbert Fields and Producer De Sylva, who wrote the book, or Cole Porter, who did the music and lyrics? They write for fun and the support of the crowd.

And who wouldn't expect beauty and character and zip from Raoul Pene DuBois, the costume and scenery genius; Robert Alton, the dance genius, and Edgar MacGregor, who has a way of helping to pull all these elements together in a story pattern that some way seems to make better sense than you might expect.

These Also Serve

There are also the usual group of gifted specialists to add the finishing touch to "Panama Hattie." These include the graceful and lively Nadine Gae, a dancer of splendid rhythm; a willowy bit of bronze billed as Carmen D'Antonio and a tapping chorus of fine training.

The principals include Arthur Treacher, who manages to extract merriment from a frozen-faced butler; and Betty Hutton, who was an amusing jitterbug last season, but who has let her directors belittle her talent by overplaying it unforgivably.

And a new wonder child, little Joan Carroll, aged 8, and precocious no end. Already a gifted little actress who has made a couple of films and who can hold her own with a whole stageful of adult principals.

And Rags Ragland, a rough but funny boy from burlesque, flanked by Pat Harrington and Frank Hyers, of similar type.

Nothing new to say of Miss Merman. She is singing especially well, and looking particularly fresh and lovely, and she makes a thorough job of her assignment, as is her custom.

The Porter lyrics, some of his best, and the Porter melodies, ditto, come over beautifully, causing me to suspect a new amplifying system. "Let's Be Buddies," for sentiment; "I've Still Got My Health," for verve; "You Said It," for Broadway. You'll be hearing a lot of them.

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *October 31, 1940*

Ethel Merman Excellent In "Panama Hattie"

By JOHN MASON BROWN

IN HER finest form, than which there is none finer, Ethel Merman sweeps triumphantly through "Panama Hattie." For the first time she is now being starred alone in a major musical comedy. The evening she dominates with all that strident precision which is hers is a happy example of our professional theatre when it is functioning at its professional best.

Cole Porter has supplied it with many pleasant melodies which benefit by the wizardry with which he can juggle the rhymes and nonsense in his lyrics. Robert Alton has seized upon the hot insinuations of Mr. Porter's music for one dance number after another which are tropical in their heat and brilliantly staged. Raoul Pene DuBois has backed these gay interludes with effective scenery, and clothed a stageful of beguiling maidens with some of the most colorful and distinguished costumes which have been seen hereabouts in a long time. And Herbert Fields with B. G. DeSylva's aid has provided a book which does its riotous and rowdy duty (with moments of sentiment thrown in) without ever getting in the way.

Mr. Fields' and Mr. DeSylva's book is classical enough to boast some subplots, one of which not only involves three gobs in some lusty shore activities but touches upon sabotage in the Canal Zone. The book's chief concern, however, is the way in which Panama Hattie, a toughie with a heart of gold, wins, first, the affections of the eight-year-old Philadelphia daughter of the man she loves, and, then, after much trouble with a villainous glamour girl, reconquers the friendship of her fiance's boss.

Miss Merman's Best

If the story fades from view from time to time, this is as it should be. Before vanishing, however, it does serve its purpose by supplying the production with both atmosphere and audacity, and Miss Merman with the best—certainly the most sympathetic—part she has so far had.

Although the evening is Mr. Porter's, Mr. DuBois', and, above all, Miss Merman's, there are others to be gratefully remembered. Pat Harrington, Frank Hyers, and Rags Ragland are immensely droll as the three comic sailors. Joan Carroll is a child actress of great charm and poise who avoids all the pitfalls of the precocious. As an English butler the grave face and grave manner of Arthur Treacher prove of most assistance. No one can accuse Betty Hutton of lacking energy. Nadine Gae is a dancer of genuine grace and attraction. And Carmen D'Antonio is a lady who by herself can teach the Art magazines lessons.

But the moving spirit in this musical comedy which Mr. DuBois has made so colorful, and its truest source of admiration, is Miss Merman. As Panama Hattie she once again mobilizes her uncommon skill to project some of Mr. Porter's glibbest tunes. Miss Merman has lost none of her energy. She blows through the script like a cyclone. She is what she is—proudly, gloriously, Broadway, not Park Avenue, finds its voice in her, and every one listens to her enraptured.

Hers is an exceptional talent. She is as gay as she is noisy, as likable as she is energetic, as amiable as she is authoritative. Moreover, she continues to grow. She can now match the brazen good humor of "I've Got My Strength" with the tenderness of "Let's Be Buddies." Miss Merman has never been better than she is now at the Forty-sixth Street. For that matter Broadway does not often see a musical comedy more expertly done than is the blushless "Panama Hattie."

"Suzanna and the Elders"

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *October 30, 1940*

'Suzanna and Elders' Is a Comedy About Plural Marriages

"Suzanna and the Elders," comedy by Lawrence Langner and Armina Marshall. Production by Jack Kirkland at the Morosco Theatre, New York, Oct. 29, 1940.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

THE Langners wrote a funny piece about "bundling" in "The Pursuit of Happiness" and that was a grand success. Now they have tried to repeat the experience by writing a funny piece about plural marriages in "Suzanna and the Elders" and are less successful.

For which, I think, there is good reason. Bundling, which was the custom of sparking couples getting into bed with a centerboard between them to save firewood and keep warm during the New England winters, offered novel and amusing twists for comedy in both lines and situations.

There isn't much that is funny even about the suggestion of plural marriages. These used to be good for burlesque skits, but they are not of much use for comedy.

Serious Fanatics

And besides that, whenever the Langners, for the sake of the laughs, bring their comedy around to a discussion of a reluctant bridegroom and an amorous bride, or to the community assignments for purposes of selective breeding, the seriousness of their disciples' convictions rise up and defeat them.

There is a band of progressives in "Suzanna and the Elders" who are honestly bent on giving Bible socialism a test. They have joined their forces in the hope of making a better world. Perhaps the Oneida Community suggested that.

There is to be no marriage or giving in marriage, but there are to be certain biological experiments for the good of the race. They are, naturally, a little ridiculous, these amiable fanatics, but they are not funny.

And though Suzanna's struggle between her loyalty to the community in which she has grown up and her possessive love for a young curly head who joins the community because of his sudden love for her is lightly appealing, it is not strong enough to hold the comedy together.

Good Performance

There is a nice cast and a good performance. Morris Carnovsky is an honest disciple of communal life as the leader of the Community House of Harmony Heights, and Jane Seymour a worthy helpmate. Paul Ballantyne is a likely hero.

Haila Stoddard is very earnest and very pretty as the puzzled Suzanna and Lois Hall has a lot of fun with the role of an ugly duckling who takes off her specks and comes out for men. Howard Freeman gets a good scene or two as the bashful selectee in the breeding test, and Royal Beal and Theodore Newton put on whiskers and give a couple of characters visual authority, at least.

Last night's audience at the Morosco found a good deal that was amusing. There is a single serviceable set by Stewart Chaney and Worthington Miner did the directing without succumbing to the temptation to play too heavily upon double-meanings.

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *October 30, 1940*

Customs and Manners in an American Socialist Community in Langners' 'Suzanna and the Elders'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SOME years ago Lawrence Langner and Armina Marshall put the Colonial custom of bundling into a saucy comedy entitled "The Pursuit of Happiness." Although they have come forward about a century and a half in "Suzanna and the Elders," which was acted at the Morosco last evening, their interest has not wandered much. They are writing about the skittishness of love in a New England socialistic community of 1878. Since Mr. Langner and Miss Marshall are married, the well-bred playgoer need not blush for them. But if he wishes to, he can regard "Suzanna and the Elders" as a fabricated comedy with a tiresome insistence upon animal husbandry in the home. Although their point of view is comic, their interest is focused on the same things that aroused the heresy-hunters sixty years ago.

• • •

Probably a playgoer in 1940 ought not to waste time defending the socialistic and communistic experiments that broke out like a rash in the East and also in the Far West in the nineteenth century. Since they failed by reason of fundamental errors, they are not sacred now. But this much is true: they represented idealistic attempts to begin a new way of life. They were part of the great surge of hope and courage that filled the hearts of Americans then. Some of that has crept into "Suzanna and the Elders." When John Adam Kent, leader of Harmony Heights, explains (through Morris Carnovsky's resonant voice) the principles of his community, the new comedy has some exhilarating things to say. When he realizes that the community has failed, and says so, "Suzanna and the Elders" at least has dignity.

• • •

But that is not what interests the authors most. They have been captivated by the program for scientific breeding at Harmony Heights. Nothing seems to them quite so funny as the solemnity with which the committee selects the men and girls for breeding —the bland expectations of the male who is more than willing to do his duty and the fussiness of the male who is not. Probably it is funny, since it is a grotesque perversion of folkways, and, besides, it has the authority of historical sanction. But the tone of the writing and acting is prurient. It is an easy subject for adolescent guffawing.

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To have a good subject thrown away so foolishly is doubly disappointing, because some of the acting and all of the production are so good. Mr. Carnovsky, made up to look like G. B. S., which is regulation in socialistic drama, gives a wholesome and hearty performance as the leader, and wins believers in the honesty of his intentions. As Suzanna, Haila Stoddard is excellent—lucid in thought and attractive in personality. Paul Ballantyne acts the part of Suzanna's unreconstructed suitor with pleasant decision. The long cast includes several other people who contribute good character parts or comic roles — Lois Hall, Philip Coolidge, Howard Freeman and Royal Beal. Stewart Chaney has designed a comfortably beautiful hall that serves as the single setting, and his costumes are enchanting, also.

As the director, Worthington Miner has gathered the random details of the comedy into a workmanlike performance. But the Langners' version of nineteenth century bundling makes a cheap and immature play.

"Suzanna and the Elders"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *October 30, 1940*

'Suzanna and the Elders,' Historical Comedy, Opens at the Morosco

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

LAWRENCE LANGNER and Armina Marshall have eyes and ears for the humors of the past, when manners were innocent and the ways of love were sly. In 1933 they dealt with bundling, a quaint sport of colonial days. In "Suzanna and the Elders," which opened at the Morosco last evening, they discuss the utopian socialism of the 1870s. It seems to have been a kind of communal bundling, but still love found a way.

The way love finds in "Suzanna" is only mildly troubled and the Langners' play is haunted by the ghosts of political arguments which have been for some time defunct. I suppose it is these arguments, wafted in a good many words down the years, which make "Suzanna" seem a long-winded and rather flaccid play, only now and then achieving that comic quaintness which the same authors exploited so amiably in "The Pursuit of Happiness." It is prettily staged and acted, amusingly conceived and for the most part quite tedious.

The authors picture a community of "Bible Socialists," extant in Massachusetts in 1878. The community leader, a bearded patriarch with the soul of a benevolent dictator, favors multiple marriage and birth control, but designates certain members of his flock to experiment in selective breeding. When a boy and a girl, to make it all much shorter than Mr. and Mrs. Langner do, fall in love they lead a revolt against the patriarch. The community reverts to a modified belief in private property and a good, firm belief in private marriage. Sister Suzanna and Brother Owen can then fall into embrace, relieved of the nagging fear that their love is selfish and capitalistic.

There is no reason I can think of why this should not make a comic play and perhaps even a parable for moderns. It doesn't, chiefly, because so much of the dialogue is laborious exposition of utopian theories, few of which seem important enough to be approached with the authors' antiquarian enthusiasm. Amusing characterizations and engaging incidents are submerged in the background.

'SUZANNA AND THE ELDERS'

A comedy in three acts by Lawrence Langner and Armina Marshall; staged by Worthington Miner; settings and costumes by Stewart Chaney; presented at the Morosco Theater on October 29, 1940, by Jack Kirkland. The cast:

Sister Mary Lamb	Lois Hall
Sister Abigail Adams	Drina Hill
Sister Flavilla Ford	Rosemary Carver
Sister Olympia Herring	Mary Boylan
Sister Hannah Plunkett	Grace Follette
Sister Amanda Perkins	Bettina Cerf
Sister Clarissa Marshall	Frances Harrison
Sister Suzanna Leeds	Haila Stoddard
Patience Kent	Jane Seymour
Brother Tom	Lloyd Bridges
Reverend Abner Owen	Philip Coolidge
Charles Owen	Paul Ballantyne
John Adam Kent	Morris Carnovsky
Brother McIntosh	Royal Beal
Brother Tupper	Howard Freeman
Brother Birdseye	Ralph Wordley
Brother Plunkett	Hale Norcross
Brother Strafford	Charles Furcolowe
Brother Lemuel	Richard Clark
Brother Longhorne	Theodore Newton
Brother Galusha	Tom Ewell
Mike Lenihan	Ross Hertz

Miss Haila Stoddard plays Suzanna pleasantly and Paul Ballantyne is a forthright lover. Morris Carnovsky devotes his full energy and his remarkable skill to the role of the patriarch, which never seems entirely worth his trouble. Several actors in minor roles get more fun out of them. Howard Freeman is entertaining as an elder who shies from his duties; Lois Hall happily perky as a girl who espouses hers almost too eagerly; Royal Beal dryly amusing as an elder with an occasionally wicked eye. But not enough comes of their efforts.

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *October 30, 1940*

Communal Sex

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

IT SEEMS that Harmony Heights in Massachusetts was one of those innumerable socialistic communities that flourished throughout America in the nineteenth century. It was, according to "Suzanna and the Elders," inhabited almost exclusively by nice-looking ingenues in quaint costumes, with a few bearded brethren about to add character, comedy and a bit of menace to the proceedings. One of the girls appears for the first act with, among other things, spectacles and unattractively arranged hair, and every playgoer present knows at once that some time in the second act she will take off the glasses, fix her hair and emerge as the belle of the colony. There is a shy and embarrassed elder, afraid of women, and you realize immediately that in the third act he will have a few drinks and become quite a lover. These, I may add, are characteristic touches, for the new play about the sex didoes on a community farm is almost completely lacking in anything fresh or striking or interesting.

* * *

There would seem to be no reason why a good comedy of some sort, whether satirical, romantic or wistful, shouldn't be written on the subject of these idealistic colonies that arose in America's hopeful midst, prospered for a time and then foundered on the shoals of sex, economics and the frailty of man. Unfortunately, "Suzanna and the Elders" decidedly isn't that comedy. For one thing, it seems completely without a point of view. For another, it has been seen fit to add a leer here and a smirk there and to turn the play into a feebly bawdy narrative that has neither charm nor good, hearty rowdiness about it. The story of how plural marriage and selected breeding in Harmony Heights brought revolt to the colony when an earnest young maiden was chosen to mate with a bearded elder, while all the time she wanted the handsome young inventor from Yale, "Suzanna and the Elders" is merely a dull little anecdote with weakly furtive bits of old-time bedroom farce appended in the hope of providing a pulmotor.

* * *

As is increasingly happening in the theater these days, the acting is better than the play. Morris Carnovsky gives feeling, dignity and humor to the role of the autocratic head of the colony and frequently writes into the work the quality of baffled but still fighting idealism, which the authors apparently strove to capture in their play and failed. Although inclined to overdo it at moments, Howard Freeman is excellent as the shy brother, who strives desperately to escape his sex obligations. Miss Lois Hall is remarkably human in the conventional role of the ugly duckling who becomes the colony seductress, and Miss Haila Stoddard and Paul Ballantyne are entirely acceptable as the heroine and the juvenile. As a couple of bearded elders, Royal Beal and Theodore Newton are helpful, as is Tom Ewell as one of the youthful rebels. All of the others suffice, or more. But "Suzanna and the Elders" leaves the subject of these nineteenth-century communities still to be dramatized.